

Statement to the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service
Amy Cohen
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National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service
2530 Crystal Drive, Suite 1000
Box #63,
Arlington, Virginia 22202

Dear Commissioners:

The Commission has asked for input on a variety of important questions with regard to national and military service. I write today to address the question **“How does the U.S. increase the desire for Americans, particularly young Americans, to serve?”**

Quite simply, the answer is to provide youth the opportunity to serve and to serve meaningfully. One of the most effective ways to increase interest in and desire for service is to expose young people to it early and often. This is the standard way to engage people in anything, whether that is reading, math, sports, or faith. To paraphrase the late Harris Wofford, you would not teach someone to play baseball through observation and discussion alone. Service – and civics – are like other complex skills and competencies: to be learned, they have to be practiced in a real world, authentic setting.

Whether you look at the practice of service as a young person as developing a habit of service or as constructing knowledge and skill – the effect is the same. Students must actually participate in doing service to develop an interest in it over time. Some may enjoy reading or watching service, but to ensure current and future interest, real world engagement is required. In addition, as with many complex subjects, we don’t just learn by doing, we learn by reflecting or intentionally analyzing that which we are doing and learning. Through this reflective analysis, we make meaning of experience and we improve. We have come to call this process of service and reflection on service, service-learning. While individuals of any age can participate in service-learning, it is a term that has been applied to young people serving, particularly in school or college settings. In addition, to be service-learning, the service must provide a problem to solve, a skill to learn, and a way to engage the participant in growth and development. This is often implied – especially when we focus on older people serving, but for service to become something a young person wants to continue – and to make a significant impact, it must engage them in activity that supports cognitive, civic, and social growth.

One important question to consider is what outcome we want students and society to gain from the service they perform. There is a great deal of evidence from the 1990s through the

mid-2010s of the value and flexibility of service and service-learning for young people. Indeed, some have called service-learning a Swiss army knife – helpful in any situation. I have attached a sampling of the numerous studies that demonstrate the power of service-learning to reach positive societal goals for youth – reduction in teen pregnancy, enhanced educational engagement, reduced absenteeism, reduced disciplinary referrals, dropout prevention, tolerance of difference, career interest, character improvement, better grades, and civic interest and engagement. Service does not automatically build civic skills, knowledge and dispositions. While it may seem an obvious outcome, in order to ensure that civic knowledge, skills and dispositions are an outcome of the service, these must be taught and intentionally emphasized if this is a desired outcome.

Another important question is who has the opportunity to serve. Middle- and upper- income young people in the US often have the chance to provide service through their schools, their faith institutions, and through scouting, 4-H, FFA, the Y, Campfire, and similar organizations. We know that many private and religious schools make service an intentional and significant part of the school curriculum or co-curriculum. But many in the communities with the fewest resources also are left out of the opportunity to serve. This denies these most vulnerable students the positive opportunities of taking responsibility and being an asset to others.

Learn and Serve America was and still can be a resource

Federal programs have been a catalyst to ensure that youth of all ages, backgrounds, and socioeconomic status have an opportunity to serve in their community and can develop the civic skills, dispositions, and knowledge to develop into adults who are service-oriented active citizens.

Federal support and funding for youth service-learning was eliminated by the Obama administration in the federal FY 2011 budget. **I recommend reinstating and significantly raising the amount of funding available for youth service through Learn and Serve America immediately.**

When the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) was created, it brought together several strands of robust community service, including youth service. There were, from 1994 onward, three streams of service: Learn and Serve America, AmeriCorps, and Senior Corps. These three streams, each with three branches, allowed CNCS to support service from cradle to grave (actually, from Kindergarten to end of life).

From 1991 (part of the Commission on National and Community Service) until 2011, Subtitle B1 of the NCSA authorized and supported youth service-learning programs for K-12 age students in schools, community organizations, and Indian Tribes, and Subtitle B2 authorized programs conducted in and by higher education institutions; these came to be known as Learn and Serve America. In addition, a National Service-Learning Clearinghouse was authorized and funded to collect and disseminate the products of Learn and Serve America grants and other service-learning training and technical assistance and research. The Clearinghouse, like its 1970s and

1980s predecessor in the ACTION agency, was designed to serve the public at large. The Clearinghouse was designed to provide support to schools, nonprofits, and colleges – and young people themselves – in supporting organized and high-quality community service throughout the United States, extending the reach and efficacy of the grant programs.

The role of Learn and Serve America was to engage school- and college-age young people in service through service-learning programs developed by schools, colleges, and afterschool programs. While these programs engaged youth in service, they increased their desire to serve, improved their educational engagement, and in many cases, developed and increased their civic skills and knowledge.

These programs received appropriations of approximately \$43M annually which was distributed to about 1500 local programs annually, reaching in the neighborhood 1 million students. One requirement for Learn and Serve America funding was that it be matched on a one to one basis at the local level.

Learn and Serve funds were distributed to state education agencies (SEAs) providing a green light or “good housekeeping seal” to education authorities and to schools, allowing the use of other education funds to support service-learning – and many education statutes were changed to make service-learning an allowable activity. This legitimated service-learning in education and significantly extended funding for it through other funds, including Title I and 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

While SEAs received their funding by formula, states were required to submit applications and these were reviewed and held to high standards. Unfortunately, the funding formula did not go far, given the appropriations – the lowest population states (WY, DC) received less than \$40,000 (that is \$40 thousand), while California’s funding hovered around \$2.7 million. But states worked hard to ensure that these funds reached the most disadvantaged schools and students and that the funds were distributed competitively.

The balance of Learn and Serve America funds was distributed competitively to school- and community- based programs for K-12 youth and to higher education institutions. These funds drove both innovation and some institutionalization of service and service-learning. In higher education particularly, given the flexibility of higher education funding and implementation along with demand from students, service-learning has become an embedded feature in many colleges and universities.

Learn and Serve America saw itself and its grantees as building a field of practice that extended well beyond the annual funding and grants. And it had considerable success in doing so. At its height 32% of high schools in the US provided opportunities for students to do service learning and about 64% organized community service for students. Nearly half of all colleges in the US had a service-learning course or office. But the loss of a federal imprimatur for civic engagement and service-learning has slowed innovation and adoption across all education sectors.

While the reauthorization on the NCSA in 2009 further elaborated Subtitle B, adding new suggested programs, the Learn and Serve America authorization is fully intact and needs only to be appropriated for the programs to begin again.

As noted above, numerous studies attribute multiple positive outcomes to service-learning. In many instances, those positive outcomes can be intentionally focused. I recommend that any programs promoted by the Commission – whether through the re-appropriation of Learn and Serve America or through new programs and funding – prescribe the outcomes to be assessed for the programs. And in the case of youth service and service-learning programs particularly, I recommend that programs assess the variety of civic skills, dispositions, and knowledge of participants in the program based on a generally used assessment. Such assessments might come from CIRCLE, AAC&U, or another widely used, validated tool. Any tool used should assess the participants' intentions to continue to serve or to plan to serve in the future, whether as a vocation or an avocation.

In short, I hope that the Commission will recommend the reinstatement of federal funding for youth service available in Subtitle B of the national service laws, and further, will consider continuing to fund SEAs as the educational authorities in each state, as well as innovative programs. Additionally, I recommend two emphases: that the assessment of all programs consider the development of participants' civic skills, dispositions, and knowledge and that the selection of programs consider the engagement of disadvantaged youth as a factor in awarding funding. By recommending the appropriation of funds for the already existing authorization in the national service laws, youth service-learning can be ramped up quickly and refined as the need arises.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'ABG', followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Amy B. Cohen

Attachments

Amy Cohen
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Amy joined the George Washington University in May 2010 as the founding Executive Director of the Honey W. Nashman Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service. The mission of the Center is to integrate civic engagement into GW's educational work and promote equity and active citizenship in a diverse democracy, focus GW's resources to address community needs through reciprocal partnerships beyond the campus, and enhance teaching, learning, and scholarship at GW.

Amy began work at the Corporation for National and Community Service in 1997. She was, from 2000 to 2008, Director of Learn and Serve America, a federal program that supported more than a million young people from Kindergarten through college in service-learning programs in schools and organizations each year. In addition, she oversaw the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, which provided resources and training to all. Amy also led White House recognition programs for service: Presidents' Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll, Presidents' Student Service Scholarships, and the Presidents' Volunteer Service Awards.

Amy managed US Programs at Save the Children that addressed child wellbeing through literacy development and obesity prevention; family engagement in school success for infants to preschoolers; and disaster response and mitigation.

Amy's career began at the University of Pennsylvania Netter Center for Community Partnerships, an international leader in academic service-learning and civic engagement.

She has a BA in sociology from Brandeis University and an MA in US history from the University of Pennsylvania. She is the mother of one daughter, who is now a graduate student.

Selected Resources:

Prevalence of Community Service and Service-Learning in K-12 Schools

<https://nces.ed.gov/pubs99/1999043.pdf>

The Impact of Service-Learning: A Review of Current Research

https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/issuebrief_servicelearning.pdf

Engaged for Success: Service-Learning as a Tool for High School Dropout Prevention

(Bridgeland, Dilulio, Wulsin)

http://civicenterprises.net/MediaLibrary/docs/engaged_for_success.pdf

Reducing Academic Achievement Gaps: The Role of Community Service and Service-Learning

Peter C. Scales, Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, Marybeth Neal, James C. Kielsmeier, Peter L. Benson
Journal of Experiential Education, 29, 38-60

<https://doi.org/10.1177/105382590602900105>

A Call to Action and Report from The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement

[A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future](#)

The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012

A Brief review of the Evidence on Civic Learning in Higher Education

<https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/crucible/CivicOutcomesBrief.pdf>

At A Glance: What We Know About the Effects of Service-Learning on College Students, Faculty, Institutions and Communities, 1993- 2000: Third Edition

Janet S. Eyler, Dwight E. Giles, Jr., Christine M. Stenson, and Charlene J. Gray

<http://www.compact.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/downloads/aag.pdf>

Bring Learning to Life

CNCS video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2-eoEi6FCo>